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ABSTRACT

Ways that workplace literacy programs can be made to work and the circumstances or forces that promote or hinder them are discussed, based on experiences in Vancouver, British Columbia, where 26 percent of the population is minority and 20 percent of the 8,000 city employees speak English as a Second Language. The story documented in this report is drawn from information from the equal employment opportunities (EEO) officer and the chief teacher in the Municipal Workplace Language Training Program. The city's model workplace literacy program fits into the Vancouver EEO mandate. The needs assessment, recruitment, and program implementation processes are described. The successful collaboration with the Canadian Union of Public Employees is also discussed. Contains 5 references. (LB)

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Collaboration in Workplace Literacy: The Vancouver Municipal Workplace Language Training Program

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Introduction

Workplace literacy programs have been actively promoted in British Columbia for several years. There have been public panel discussions. A one-day conference on workplace literacy was held. An official of the Business Council of B.C. has been active in literacy advocacy. Discussions in trade union circles are increasingly intensive. The Council of Forest Industries and the International Woodworkers of America have studied language difficulties in provincial sawmills. The B.C. Federation of Labour is examining workplace literacy needs and program possibilities. Nevertheless, workplace programs have only slowly been organized in B.C.

Literacy advocates often feel that workplace literacy raises sensitive issues, especially in a province with a history of intense labour-management antagonism. Even raising the literacy issue may threaten workers with blocked advancement, or even dismissal. Furthermore, there are difficult questions of control over curriculum, recruitment and reporting. (Training for workers is limited, and the politics involved are difficult, in Canada as a whole, not only in B.C., and to training as a whole, not only literacy. See Davis, Huot, et al., 1989; and Muszynski and Wolfe, 1989.)

This study aims to contribute to a body of documentation of how workplace literacy programs can be made to work, and of the circumstances and forces that promote or hinder them. (For interesting accounts of other workplace programs, see Añorve, 1989; Soifer, Young and Irwin, 1989; and Levine, 1991). The study looks at the issue of collaboration between management and unions in workplace literacy, in conjunction with questions of workplace literacy needs analysis and recruitment. This study examines this issue within the organization of the Municipal Workplace Language Training Program, operated under the auspices of the Equal Employment Opportunities Program (EEO) of the City of Vancouver.

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Learner-centred literacy teaching, for the predominantly second-langauge learners in the program, is described in another case study in this series ("Teaching Literacy to Second Language Learners.") Ideally, both case studies should be read together.

The story told here is largely based on the information and even the words of the EEO officer most concerned with the program, and the program's chief teacher — even when the text is not sprinkled with quotation marks.

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Background

There are many immigrants and speakers of English as a second language in Vancouver. In the Vancouver population as a whole, 26% are visible minorities. Of the roughly 8000 employees of the City of Vancouver, about 20% speak English as a second language. Within the city government, there is special attention to problems that arise between immigrants and minorities, as well as women, and the dominant groups in Canadian society. The city's Equal Employment Opportunities program has a mandate to find and reduce institutional racism and sexism, and racial and sexual harrassment. This includes, among other matters, people's access to city employment, and to promotions.

The EEO is also concerned with the equitable provision of services for the public. It is often seen throughout the city government as "the fixer" for racial, cultural and language problems. Its general philosophy is to work with members of cultural and linguistic minorities, and listen to how they identify problems and envision solutions. Literacy and language ability determine access. So they fit the EEO mandate.

EEO officials recognize "a strong political commitment to equity in the city," under mayors of the 1980s and from the city manager. There's a management belief that fairness is everybody's best interest, and that this can be communicated. This support is key in EEO efforts, and it gives leeway for experimentation in identifying and addressing problems.

Getting started

The beginning of the City of Vancouver Workplace Language Program can be seen in phone calls and reports to EEO, about language difficulties. For example:

- A superintendant of one department phoned in to say that many of the Indo-Canadian men that worked under him had failed a brake test, and so couldn't become truck drivers. Could somebody come and teach the brake test? (Superintendants are under some pressure to see minority promotions).
- In another department, one woman (Canadian-born, with two years of community college) had six times failed a personnel exam (a standardized language skill test), and so couldn't get permanent status, and never built up any seniority. Yet she trained other people in her worksite.

- In another department, workers were writing documents with legal implications for the city, and supervisors were worried about the workers' language skills. In another situation a clerical worker didn't take phone messages adequately. In both cases there were concerns about union conflicts if workers were let go.
- An Italian foreman had ordered seven yards of cement, about a truckload, for the next morning's job on the seawall. He arrived in the morning to find 10 trucks parked and waiting. He was puzzled. This is what had happened: he spoke in the manner of many Italians who have learned English, adding vowel sounds to the ends of words. So his "seven" came out more like "sevenee." It was heard as "seventy" on the other end of the phone. (Luckily another use was found for the extra cement).

The accumulation of workplace language and literacy trouble stories defined a problem. The mandate of the Equal Employment Opportunities office defined who might attempt to address it. In mid-1989, EEO official Norma Jean McLaren was instructed to set up a program, in response to departmental demands.

There had been two earlier efforts to set up a language and literacy program. One effort involved meetings with the local community college, whose management said students could be referred to their regular, ongoing programs. But the EEO wanted something specifically related to the workplace. A second effort saw students sent to a private training company with computer-assisted instruction, using the IBM PALS program. Students found the computerized training patronizing, and made comments like "I'm not a child and don't want to deal with cartoons;" or simply, "This isn't what I wanted." It was clear that the computer-assisted program, operated away from the worksite, wasn't the program needed. (There had also been an earlier experience with a specific air brake curriculum at a community college; workers had not gone).

Norma Jean McLaren now saw that she needed to follow her gut instincts, towards what she later came to call "flexible" and "learner-centred" programming. With the assistance of TIP (Training Incentives Program) funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, the EEO drafted a call for proposals for conducting a needs assessment, and developing and implementing a learner-centred workplace language and literacy program.

The successful proposal was submitted by the Invergarry Learning Centre, a school board-sponsored, community-oriented program in the working-class suburb of Surrey. The program, publishers of the widely circulated *Voices* magazine, had experience in conducting an ESL literacy course and job-creation project for immigrant women who were experienced seamstresses.

The Invergarry program shared the EEO view that second-language issues should not be excluded from the treatment of "literacy." A teacher-consultant from the Invergarry program, Gary Pharness, has become the chief teacher in the city program.

The program has now run for three complete sessions. Support for the program has come from several sources. The City of Vancouver budgets $80,000 a year for employee release time, and provides EEO staff time. In different sessions, funding has been provided by the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology; a local school board; and the province's Open Learning Agency.

Workplace literacy needs assessment

In the five-week needs assessment, the project consultant and EEO staff contacted middle management designated to deal with the language program, in eleven city departments. The departments anticipated to have the greatest needs were Housing and Properties, which included building service workers, long-term care workers, and janitors; Health, with clerical workers and medical and dental assistants; Licensing and Inspection, again with many clerical workers; and Engineering, where most "outside workers" are situated. The Park Board and the Vancouver Public Library were contacted as well.

There were also contacts with unions, and some with individual workers, but it was felt that workers' views (a flexible program, not computer-based, not involving big classes) were already known from evaluations of earlier programming efforts. With limited time, the needs assessment focused on managers.

There were two aspects of the needs assessment. One focused on learning what needs and what people the program could serve. The other focused on promoting the program, especially with managers and supervisors. Both these processes worked through hearing stories, and turning them into anecdotes to be repeated, which often provoked others to reflect on their experience.

Needs assessment brought many stories to light like those desribed above. Considering clerical workers, for example, there were stories of good workers who couldn't do all facets of their jobs, such as dealing with the public on the phone or over the counter; or dicta-typists whose work required many corrections because they weren't hearing the inflections in words.

Needs assessment thus was not a simple matter of asking managers what skills they wanted workers to have. It was never said that the program would increase productivity. Some managers did ask how job tasks would be

transposed into a formally defined process of curriculum, instruction and assessment. The response was, "That's not how it works." Managers were urged to accept that, in the long run, it's most important for workers to decide what to study; and that an effective study process involves beginning in open-ended speaking, writing and reading, and brings in specific workplace materials later, when learners decide to bring them. There was, however, an agreement with managers and supervisors to discuss, halfway through each session, how the program was going, and what workplace materials it might be helpful to introduce.

In the program promotion process there were explicit discussions with managers and supervisors of "What's in it for you?" Health and safety issues were raised, especially with Housing and Engineering. Supervisory responsibility for errors that might arise from workers' language difficulties were discussed. The detrimental effects on the working atmosphere of the isolation of workers in ethnic ghettoes was considered.

The needs assessment was completed in the fall of 1989. It called for classes to meet six hours a week, with teacher-student ratios possibly as low as one to five. Workers could be involved in the program one-half on city time and one-half on their own for one 12-week session; then one-quarter on city time and three-quarters on their own for another session; and thereafter entirely on their own time. Classes would be held at the centrally-located City Hall, at the Trout Lake Community Centre in the east end, and at the Manitoba Yards in south Vancouver, the central facility for the city Engineering department. The program would involve 100 students a year.

The unions that organize city employees first responded to the program proposal with uneasiness about what management wanted. After some discussion and reassurance that management was willing not to direct curriculum, and that they would receive no evaluations of individuals, unions "concurred" with the program (the term used within the city administrative process to indicate no opposition). "Concurrence" changed to active involvement at a later date.

The program's curricular autonomy has been important in two ways. It is essential for the program's learner-centred teaching. But also, in practice, the autonomy of the program was the necessary basis for collaboration between management and labour.

Recruitment

As literacy workers know, literacy programs always address inequalities in language skill and opportunity to use language. These inequalities exist in larger social contexts. They are often intertwined with gender and ethnic

relations. Within workplaces, these inequalities are embedded in specific workplace hierarchies. To promote literacy is to struggle against these inequalities. Recruitment to literacy programs should be understood in this broad context.

To describe recruitment within the city of Vancouver requires looking again at the EEO. The EEO's mandate to reduce institutional racism and sexism commits it to aspects of the struggle against inequalities, and in this effort it forms a central part of an informal network in the city government. Some individuals in this network have come to the city with commitments against inequality. Others are graduates of a central EEO training program, the Kingswood Training Model, which offers intensive week-long residential workshops for middle and upper management. The workshops deal with multiculturalism and employment equity. Individuals from all city departments and boards have attended workshops. At the end of workshops, managers contract with EEO regarding changes in their areas of responsibility. Graduates often become reflective about cross-cultural relations, language and people's abilities, and many work supportively with the EEO.

Initial recruitment efforts focused on areas of the city government where managers were expected to be advocates of the language program (nine-tenths were graduates of the Kingswood program). This was done within a long-range strategy of establishing selected bases for the program and its credibility before moving on to other areas. Recruitment has worked best where there was direct contact between the language program and supervisors who know the individual workers. Consider just one example. A woman we can call Lois, who worked as a Library Assistant 1 ("the bottom of the heap," as she said) came to the program. She explained that her supervisor, a woman two years from retirement, who was like a mother to her, sent her to the program so that she would be able to keep her job in the library.

There are of course people who see language and literacy inequalities as natural, and the struggle against them as troublesome. For example, there is some ongoing resistance to the very idea of education for manual labourers. Some say things like, "It's better for the Italians to be on the streets anyhow."

Although the vast majority of supervisors have been supportive, some obstruct recruitment. They may keep papers on their desks for months, or say, "None of you guys want to go back to school, do you?" "We've got one guy from here going there already, it would be really hard to send somebody else." "Sure you can go, you'll just have to make up your time later on."

The program staff recognize that supervisors who refer students need ongoing support and encouragement, since they may be under pressure, for example if it takes longer to get jobs done because workers are away studying.

Similarly, in class there is talk with students about asserting the right to study, and about handling kidding by other workers.

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As the program matures, certain problems in the recruitment effort have become clear, and the organization of the effort for recruitment is changing.

Although there isn't precise data on the number of people referred by supervisors, and the number who come independently, it is clear that most students have come through supervisor referrals. The number coming independently increased slowly in the second and third sessions, as people responded to posted notices, or heard about the program through worker-to-worker communications. In the third session, enrollment was somewhat down, perhaps because there was less EEO staff time available than before for recruitment work. In the fourth session, however, enrollment was high again, as more people saw notices on bulletin boards and in union newsletters, and as there was increased communication about the program through union counsellors, shop stewards, and health and safety officers.

Another problem, which has only become clear with experience, is that nine students out of ten have been second-language speakers of English. Those operating the program expect that increased union involvement, along with word-of-mouth recruitment by program graduates, will bring more Canadian-born students and native speakers of English. It appears that this shift began to occur, in the fourth session.

Developing collaboration, and the program as a model

The EEO (through its affiliated organization, the Hastings Institute), and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) — which represents the city's "outside workers," have come together as partners, with a shared intention to expand workplace literacy and language programming. They are working to develop a program that can be made available to other employers and employees. CUPE, along with the B.C. Federation of Labour, will help to identify possible sites. The Hastings Institute will work with employers and proposed teachers in implementing programs.

Within both these organizations, there have already been changes and learning. Likewise the forms of collaboration are already changing. EEO has asked City Council to approve a policy that language development is an ongoing concern. That approval has been secured, and the program is now "permanent."

CUPE now clearly perceives the program as a way to serve workers' interests, for example in gaining access to the seniority system. CUPE support has also been stimulated by the interest in literacy of the Canadian Labour Congress and the B.C. Federation of Labour. The union now dedicates staff time to program publicity, and provides a language program space away from the worksite. In this space there is a two-hour-a-week service that assists workers in dealing with forms and complaints, and an off-site class for workers who do not want management to know of their language problems.

New questions will arise certainly arise as the program is developed in other settings. Consider here just one. Many workplaces have less amicable labour-management relations than the city of Vancouver, and most workplaces do not have an internal unit like EEO, which stands somewhat apart from both management and labour, while promoting both management interests in clear communication and workers' interests in self-development, job security and advancement. Specific organizational forms, to provide the program autonomy that is necessary for collaboration, will have to be devised in each organizational setting.

A final note

This case study of collaboration in a workplace language and literacy program has told at least a part of one program's story. The case study reflects the time constraints of its production — a few days for interviews, classroom observations, and reviewing documents, a few more days for analyzing interviews, and few more days (though they stretched on) for writing. It shows what can be done in that amount of time.

Almost everything in this case study I have learned from EEO official most concerned, the teacher who operates the program on a day-to-day basis, and a number of students. The write-up tells the program's story largely as it appears to them. It would have been easy to spend a month, interviewing others in the EEO office and the city management, trade union officials, administrators in other sponsoring organizations, more students in the program, workers who didn't come to the program or even know about it, leaders and members of various community ethnic organizations, and so on. The write-up could have been very much richer and denser description.

As noted at the outset, this case study aims to contribute to the documentation of ways that workplace literacy programs can be made to work, and of the circumstances and forces that promote or hinder them. The study has described processes that could be explored in thematic analyses of a number of workplace literacy programs. For example, any workplace program will involve an organizational process that puts together funding, physical space, staff time, and information flow. It will involve constructing

an understanding that promoting literacy is a goal that can be shared by the diverse interests at play in a workplace setting, without suppressing their differences. These organizational processes and these understandings need not always be the same.

- Here, the telling and exchange of workplace language trouble stories helped provoke the reflection that led to the program. Must it always?
- Here, the program has operated through an internal equal opportunities unit with a mandate that encompasses language and literacy activities. The program has been supported by a management belief that visible fairness is in everybody's interest, and by pressures for minority hiring and advancement. Under what other auspices and what other pressures can programs be established?
- Here, an equal opportunities unit has secured the program autonomy that allows for labour-management collaboration, and for a flexible response to workers' needs. How else can this program autonomy been secured?

Hopefully this study has allowed readers with experience in workplace programming or intentions to become involved, and students and researchers in literacy programming, to engage with the dialogue that has produced one remarkable effort.

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